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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR PROPOSED DECEMBER 6 SECDEF VISIT TO CROATIA

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Frank for Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) Your visit to Croatia just two weeks after parliamentary elections will give the USG a unique opportunity to influence the next government's policy. Although HDZ President Ivo Sanader has not finished putting together the coalition which will give him the support needed to pass a vote of confidence, his overwhelming victory in the November 23 poll means that he will almost certainly be Croatia's next Prime Minister by early January.

2. (C) Even before his campaign went into high gear, Sanader made clear his intention to take steps to improve Croatia's relationship with the U.S. Since the election, the HDZ has in private meetings with the Ambassador and in public statements re-affirmed its intention to sign an Article 98 agreement and to move to deploy Croatian troops to join the coalition in Iraq. Despite the HDZ's strong showing in the election, however, Sanader's majority in parliament will be very narrow; he may not be able to deliver easily on these pledges. Nevertheless, it would be appropriate to "cash this check" by expressing the USG's gratitude for these tough policy decisions.

3. (C) Both in meetings with us and with the EU, Sanader has demonstrated that he knows the right things to say about addressing Croatia's war legacy. While he chooses his words carefully, Sanader has said that a government led by the HDZ would cooperate with The Hague war crimes tribunal and would address refugee return and property restitution issues. Your visit should underscore that both the U.S. and the EU will look for results, not just statements on these issues; cooperation with the war crimes tribunal is not negotiable.

4. (C) Croatia made good progress towards NATO membership during the tenure of the Racan government. Just over three years ago, Croatia was outside of Partnership for Peace. Now completing its second cycle in the Alliance's Membership Action Plan, Croatia has demonstrated its commitment to making the necessary sacrifices to reform its military and develop capabilities to make a contribution to NATO. One important goal of your visit would be to convince Sanader to continue the progress begun in the past two years. This was not merely SDP party policy, but a sound direction which met with the approval of NATO allies.

5. (C) Reform of the Croatian Armed Forces (CAF) is progressing slowly, but in a positive direction. The focus of CAF's reform efforts in 2002 and 2003 has been on downsizing and restructuring at the price of not training and modernizing the force. This process is being conducted in a transparent manner, with criteria set on professional capabilities and the needs of the force, not political affiliation. Croatia has made significant progress in de-politicizing its armed forces. But senior HDZ officials have suggested that they may reverse some of this progress. Your visit could serve to underscore that NATO expects the uniformed services to remain outside of politics.

6. (C) Although the Racan government -- and President Mesic -- were not helpful on Iraq, Croatia has been an active supporter of international efforts to combat terrorism. Croatia deployed a highly-professional platoon of military police to Afghanistan. This unit functioned as a national unit under the supervision of the German contingent during ISAF III and is now under Canadian command as part of a Canadian MP company in ISAF IV. Croatia made significant contributions of weapons and munitions to the fledgling Afghan National Army and made donations of humanitarian assistance both to Afghanistan and Iraq.

7. (C) When the Racan government signaled in July 2003 that it might be ready to make a troop contribution for Iraq, Croatia established a liaison officer at U.S. CENTCOM headquarters to begin technical talks in advance of a political decision to deploy. Although the Racan government decided to defer deployment until after elections, Croatia's liaison officer remains at CENTCOM working to coordinate issues from Croatia's ISAF mission. Since this officer already in Tampa and since Croatia's Special Operations Forces soldiers designated for Iraq have already finished a five-month training course, deployment of Croatia's soldiers

-- provided the HDZ can line up enough votes in parliament --  
could take place quickly.

18. (S/NF) Acquisition of Croatia's S-300. Two successive  
Croatian Ministers of Defense have promised, yet not  
delivered on facilitating the transfer to the USG of  
Croatia's incomplete, yet highly desirable S-300 (SA-10

Grumble) surface-to-air missile. MOD Antunovic worked  
closely with our Defense Attache to orchestrate transfer of  
this system to the USG, but she ran out of political support  
and time before the parliamentary elections brought a halt to  
the transfer. Elements of this system are intended for use  
by the U.S. Air Force in testing and validating future  
generation aircraft. An ongoing legal dispute between the  
GoC and arms purveyor Zvonimir Zubak over S-300 ownership has  
the system locked up in civil court proceedings. Ceding  
possession rather than ownership is a possible workaround for  
the GoC. Department of State, OSD and Air Force staffs are  
actively involved in this foreign material acquisition case.  
FRANK

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